Lynn Abercrombie
Remarks as Delivered for the Opening Reception Of the Exhibit "The Middle East Through American Eyes: The Photography of Tom Abercrombie
February 24, 2007
National Museum, 8:30pm

Good evening everyone. I can't begin to thank everyone who has made this possible, so I'm not going to even try. But I will say that I am delighted to be here for this wonderful exhibition and celebration of the works of my late husband, Tom Abercrombie. I can think of no finer tribute to his memory than this event in the country he loved so much. I can safely say that Tom made more trips to Saudi Arabia than any of the other countries where he worked. As you will learn shortly, much of his unpublished writings about our life of travel, I will be reading to you. Tom was a magnificent photographer, an eloquent speaker, an even more eloquent writer, whose words, published in the National Geographic, reached millions of people around the world.

Tom established himself from his very first overseas assignment, the country of Lebanon, as an excellent photographer. He didn't see himself as a writer at that time, but his writing career began there; before he left that assignment in Lebanon, he was asked if he would be interested in writing the story as well and he leapt to the challenge. The editors liked his manuscript and promoted him to the elite Foreign Editorial Staff, the group that could photograph and write their own stories.

Tom completed some 16 stories on the Middle East. He produced 25 other articles that covered 7 continents, not always doing both jobs but, whenever possible, that was his preference. On one assignment alone, "The Sword and the Sermon," July 1972, he visited over 25 Islamic countries from Morocco to Kazakhstan.

For years Tom had suggested to his editors a story about the 14th century Muslim scholar, Ibn Battuta, who had traveled more miles than Marco Polo. This extraordinary young chap left his home in Morocco to make the pilgrimage to Mecca and continued his travels over the next three decades that took him to Spain, Africa, the Middle East, the Arabian Peninsula, China, Russian Northern Asia, Afghanistan, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and as far away as the Maldives Islands, ending up back in his home in Tangiers to write of his travels. Tom, as writer, and James Stanfield, as photographer, traced his routes, taking over a year to produce their article "Ibn Battuta, Prince of Travelers," published in December 1991.

I've been asked many questions about Tom's conversion to Islam. Nothing could explain it better than what he himself wrote. First, though, some of his words about the Arabic language – then his accounting of becoming a Muslim.

"There in the heart of the Arab world, I began to realize, my illiteracy in foreign languages had become a serious obstacle between myself and reality. English was spoken widely in the cities but was of little help in the hinterlands. To find a competent interpreter willing to rough it in the desert was not easy. A growing interest in the history and philosophy of Islam was leading me

into the finer points of the Arabic language. Arabic is of a Semitic construction using trilateral roots, highly inflected with a daunting maze of verb forms and subtle pronunciations that challenge both mind and tongue. It is written right to left. Different Arab countries use their own dialect. Fortunately, educated Arabs know classical Arabic, the unchanging Arabic of the Koran, the elegant heart of the language. So that's where I began my studies."

He continues:

"While I was in Saudi Arabia I wanted to cover the Haj, a pilgrimage to Mecca. Non-believers are not admitted to the Holy City, but the year before I had embraced Islam. Long conversations with learned Muslim friends had taught me that I might qualify. Prince Muhammad Ibn Faisal in Jeddah and an Arab scholar-diplomat Abdulrahman Azzam Pasha – both impeccably fluent in English as well as Arabic – patiently gave me instructions. Essentially I went before a Qadi, an Islamic judge, who certified me and inscribed my new credentials into my passport. I had officially become a Muslim."

"That year, 1965, joining three million of the faithful from all around the world, I completed the pilgrimage to Mecca. For them, it was the greatest experience of their lives, as important as birth and marriage. It was no less emotional for me. I was one of the few westerners ever allowed to photograph their passionate celebration. Two years later, I produced a film there for the Geographic lecture series. Over the years I visited the Holy City a dozen times. My fluency in Arabic never reached a level where I could savor the supreme quality of the Koran. But the power and beauty of the Meccan experience needs no translation."

Tom writes in a letter of another pilgrimage to Mecca. After the pilgrimage he is honored by a royal invitation. He said:

"Dinner with Saudi Arabia's King Fahd for diplomats and journalists at His Majesty's Meccan palace, a lavish affair for some 600 guests. The King patiently greets each of us, then, after prayer, we sit down to 100 roast sheep, giant grilled snappers, and mounds of rice and dates. Cardamom coffee follows, poured by robed servants armed with shining brass coffee pots and golden daggers. Before leaving Mecca, I enter the Great Mosque, in the calm and coolness of late evening one last time for seven farewell circumambulations of the Ka'aba. Beneath its gold embroidered drapes, thousands press against the granite shrine in tears of joy. They realize, as do I, that after Mecca one's life will never be quite the same."

In 1966, National Geographic Magazine published a 52-page cover story of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by Tom in which he relates his many experiences. I accompanied him on part of the journey into the Empty Quarter and later driving across the country by Land Rover through Riyadh and on to Jeddah.

Tom wrote: "It's a long way from the middle west where we grew up to the Middle East. Lynn and I often marveled at how fate brought us far from home. To begin with, our timing was perfect. Many treks into the unknown were more strenuous than nowadays but that only added to the adventure."

Tom and I always enjoyed our visits with the Bedouin. He explained to one sheikh on one of our desert trips:

"'Lynn and I feel much like nomads ourselves,' I said, exploring the things that a Bedouin's life

and ours had in common. The sheikh pondered such a thought. 'Our Land Rover is our camel,' I went on. 'While you move from place to place to find rain and grass, we travel constantly searching for stories and photographs.' I caught a slight smile. All Bedouins are poets and delight in such metaphor."

Tom and the sheikh continued their conversation, and the next thing I know I am on the auctioning block. The sheikh thinks I should be worth 35 camels. Tom says I'm worth 60. Back and forth, finally agreeing on 50. It was all in fun and I caught the humor.

Again, Tom writes in 2005:

"These days we hear a lot about the Middle East, much of it distorted by politics and war. But back then, in the late 1950's, America was paying it little mind. So badly was the Middle East ignored that almost any report from there became a 'scoop.' Yet my first visit there taught me the subject was anything but dull. For a photographer, it was a wonderland, exotic beauty everywhere. It lay rich in history, history that had set our own western cultures in motion; there in Mesopotamia writing was invented, and agriculture was first developed. Moreover, it was a strategic part of the modern world – and would grow more so – as time would show. Best of all, it was still very USA friendly, a comfortable place to work."

Arthur Clark writes in Aramco World Magazine in November/December 1986, about the Wabar Meteorite buried somewhere in Saudi Arabia's Rub-al-Khali (Empty Quarter):

"Abercrombie had arrived in Dhahran to research an article on Saudi Arabia and James Mandaville of Aramco had told Abercrombie about the meteorite and its location. 'The journalist's ear pricked up at this potential romantic touch to his story,' Mandaville says, 'and he soon had permission for a trip there with a Bedouin guide. As a result, he scooped the world."

Tom already had big plans for our journey into the Empty Quarter when I arrived in Dhahran. He said I could stay behind if I didn't want to make the rough trip. I wasn't about to miss a trip into the mysterious Rub-al-Khali.

We had been warned about the dangers of traveling into this unfriendly place where there were no landmarks, trees, grass or people. Our chances of finding it were slim. After all, hadn't the British explorer, H. St. John Philby, after reaching the site of the craters, found nothing? Tom had already set his mind on finding that elusive meteorite and, I should have known that whatever he set his mind to, he usually succeeded.

We journeyed with our Murrah Bedouin guide, Jabr, in our Land Rover, followed by a back-up truck, loaned by the Saudi government, carrying our much needed gasoline, drinking water, and provisions. Jabr, reported as the best of the Murrah tribe for such an expedition, seemed very confident. Our back-up truck slowed our pace, stopping frequently to patch their leaking radiator hose and feed the radiator our precious drinking water. Still, no one was discouraged as we pressed on. Jabr, riding with us in the Land Rover, seemed irritated by Tom's frequent stops every hour or two. But Tom prided himself as an expert navigator and went ahead checking the odometer and making sightings with the compass, and jotting notes in his notebook or on maps and charts we had been provided by Aramco. Tom told me our sextant was useless because of the haze and the many mirages in the desert.

After three days of traveling and camping in the desert, Tom had made one last stop. But

before he could even get out of the Land Rover, Jabr exclaimed, “It’s just over there beyond the dunes.” A five-minute drive proved him right.

We had reached the site of the meteor craters, but would we find anything?

While it had been buried before for previous explorers, the shifting winds had uncovered enough for us to see the prize, “the Wabar Meteorite,” that had been buried before under 30 feed of sand.

Here is Tom’s description of this great find as he wrote in the national Geographic Magazine: “Rumor has become reality; the biggest iron meteorite ever found in Arabia lay at our feet, shaped roughly like a saucer, it measured four feet in diameter and two feet at the center. A little quick geometry puts its weight at 2 ½ tons.”

In 1966, James Mandaville journeyed to the site with equipment to brink it back to Dhahran for further studies. In 1968 it was taken to King Saud University in Riyadh where it was put on display in front of the Faculty of Science. Can you imagine my surprise yesterday when I came to the museum and started my tour, and the very first thing I saw was the Wabar Meteorite that I hadn’t seen since May 1965?

Tom writes in the introduction of our yet to be published book:

“As the years went by, Lynn and I found ourselves devoting more of our time to the Middle East. The world was discovering the region’s crucial importance. From Morocco to Iraq we traveled, and across the Sahara. I covered the first Gulf War, the “tanker” war. Then Lynn and I together did Egypt, the Russian’s first move into Afghanistan, later the Sultanate of Oman that guards the strategic Strait of Hormuz, then we followed the ancient incense caravan routes 1200 miles through Arabia’s deserts north to Jordan.”

On March 16, 2006, Tom had open-heart surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. Unfortunately, though the surgery was successful, Tom developed a pulmonary embolism, and a few days later and we lost him on April 3, 2006. After he passed away, a dear friend was quoted in our local paper saying, “It is like a mountain has fallen.”

Thank you for inviting me here today and thank you for this memorable tribute to Tom. I believe his spirit lives on in this impressive body of work and in the minds of those million readers who first learned of the beauty of the Middle East through his articles in the National Geographic Magazine over a 38-year career. His extreme fondness for the Middle East always shines through. Thank you all very much.